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Lessons in Forgetting: A Study of Women's Demand and Dilemma and Determination in
Modern Perspective

Abstract: Indian English Literature has been flourishing continuously and women novelists have been enriching immensely. Anita Nair has marked her presence as the voice of unvoiced section of the society. Women have been often allocated secondary place in the male dominated society although man and woman are complimentary to each other. There is a set of traditional role for women which requires a new definition in the modern perspective. This paper attempts to study the dilemma, demand and determination of women in the modern perspective.

Keywords: – Traditional role, dilemma, demand, determination, unvoiced section, perspectives, male dominated, etc.

Anita Nair is a well-known literary figure in the realm of Indian English literature. She is a prolific writer. She has produced a number of well-known novels such as *The Better Man* (2000), *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Cut like Wound* (2012), *The Lilac House* (2012), *Chain of Custody* (2013).

Lessons in Forgetting is a well-praised novel written by Anita Nair. Meera is the chief protagonist of this novel. She lives with her mother and grandmother in Lilac House. One day

she meets Giri who is a member of a photo shoot team. She falls in love and got married. Giri is an ambitious man and wants a huge amount of start a business of his own. He tries to persuade Meera to sell the Lilac House to fulfil the requirement. Meera is a well-educated modern woman and refuses to carry the order of her husband. One day she finds that Giri has disappeared mysteriously. After the disappearance of Giri from Meera's life all the responsibilities come on Meera's shoulder. The narrator points out the desire of woman of middle classes through the character Meera. The novelist remarks:

Meera never dreamt big dreams. She had no desire for designer clothes, diamonds or expensive holidays... Enough to keep roof over their heads and food in their bellies. Enough to retain dignity and not have to ask reluctant removed relatives for a temporary handout. Enough to live as they did. (Lessons in Forgetting 41)

After the departure of Giri from her life she faces a lot of challenges to meet the needs of family. Meera has a son and a daughter and now she is the sole breadwinner of the family. Meera states "we may starve to death but it will be in gracious surroundings" (Lessons in Forgetting 111). Meera doesn't surrender before the challenges and started to manage all the responsibilities by herself. Nair beautifully describes the shifting of paradigm of identity crisis in the modern society. Giri feels inferior to Meera in the Lilac house where his views is rejected. Giri states:

There is no us. It is always you. Your house. Your family. Your friends. Has it occurred to you how I feel? (Lessons in Forgetting 108)

In the patriarchal society women have been facing subordination. They have been allocated secondary role and are deprived of the right to equality and liberty. In this patriarchal set-up woman faces the identity crisis. A renowned critic Simone de Beauvoir remarks: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society, it is civilization as a whole

that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (Beauvoir 295). Meera moves in her life and finds a job of research assistant in the office of Jak who is a renowned cyclone expert. She wants to give up her old identity and goes to salon to get a new look. She remarks:

I've had this same hairstyle for the last twenty-two years. Ever since Giri came into my life. And I didn't want to change a thing. My hair, my home, my dreams, myself. I so wanted it to be what he wanted. It's time I became a new woman. Someone I would like to be. (Lessons in Forgetting 177)

Meera carries all the obligations beautifully and finds a new life in the company of Jak. She makes all the arrangements for her children and provides qualitative education. She fulfils all the requirements of her mother and grandmother. Meera gets an invitation from her friend but she feels awkward in the party in the absence of her husband but she is boosted up by her friend by saying that "A woman by herself at a party is like a man by himself" (Lessons in Forgetting 183). Meera rejects the traditional ideas that a woman cannot lead a life without husband. She does not remain traditional woman who used to face the subordination, suppression and oppression without raising any protest against the patriarchal monopoly. The novelist points out the psychological impact of patriarchal set-up on women how from the very beginning they have been taught about the role of men in women's life. Meera remarks "we are brought up to believe that our husband is our god. His wishes are ours, and without him we are nothing... whether he is hard as a rock or as worthless as a weed, a husband is a husband. Can you make life without your husband?" (Lessons in Forgetting 178)

Meera gets a new beginning in the company of Jak and with the passage of time a new relationship started shaping its destiny. Jak comes to India to find out the mystery behind the murder of his daughter Smriti. He is a cyclone expert and predicts about the dimensions and behave of cyclone but he fails to study the inner cyclone of human beings in the modern society.

Jak meets a government doctor to get some more information regarding the fatal accident happened to his daughter. Here he is encountered with the cultural clash. He is scolded by the doctor for not bringing up his children according to Indian culture. The narrator points out the cultural differences in the modern perspective. The doctor remarks:

You see, that's the problem with you people. You NRIs. You don't understand that grown-up girls need to be with their mothers. You think this is America. You send your daughter back filled with all the permissive ideas you teach them in the West and then when something goes wrong, you blame India for it. She was here with a man, I hear. By herself. (Lessons in Forgetting 54)

Smriti is the second leading character in the novel. She is the daughter of Jak and Jak used to narrate fascinating stories of India and its culture to his children. Smriti comes to India to complete her study. She comes to know about the female foeticide and misery condition of women in the society, she raises voices against the type of follies and vices prevalent in the society. She remarks:

Despite the laws and regulations, women still find a way of discovering the sex of their unborn babies. If not the women, their families. They abort the foetus if it's a girl. Soon there may come a day when there are no women left. (Lessons in Forgetting 285)

It is a matter of fact that technologies have made life very easy in the modern time; each and every information is easily accessible. There are also many dark side of advancement of technology advancement and finding of sex of unborn babies is one of them. Abortion is banned in many countries. Smriti makes her life down for the noble cause. Smriti is a well-educated and courageous girl and tries to draw the attention of the society towards the upcoming hazardous due to the abortions of the foetus of girl. Jak always narrates about his native village Minjikapuram which is located in Tamil Nadu. The story about the Indian society

fascinates Smriti. One day she visits Minjikapuram for an awareness campaign. She gets an injury and goes to hospital for treatment. She observes that a number of pregnant women have come for scanning to know the sex of the foetus. The practice of finding sex of the foetus shows the dark side of modern society and Smriti determines herself to eradicate the type of practice. She says it is illegal and it should be stopped for the betterment of society. The novelist remarks:

It's illegal! Smriti voice rose. They do it here. Why do you think we came here? The scan doctor is not from this town. They bring him from somewhere else and he tells us if we ask him, the woman whispered... All these pregnant women, they come from various parts of district... It's because of the scan doctor. And then, if you want it, they'll do the abortion here as well! (Lessons in Forgetting 292)

Smriti is a conscious character and knows the outcome of abortions of the foetus of girl. She is not only modern by her dress but also by her ideas and social concern. She started to collect the ocular proof against the practice of finding sex and abortions of the foetus of girl child for making a report. She talks to local people about the doctors' involvement and comes in contact to lady, Chinnathayi whose daughter is no more after an abortion done by the doctor Srinivasan. Smriti asks the lady to make available all the required documents related her daughter's abortion which lead her to death. It was a threatening to Srinivasan's business so he makes a plan to clear his way by destroying Smriti. One day Srinivasan's men call Smriti at sea beach by using the name Chinnathayi. When Smriti arrives at the beach for collecting the papers she is attracted by three men of Srinivasan and destroyed brutally. The novelist remarks "They were animals, these men. They tore at the girl and it seemed the more she screamed, the more excited they became... It was the smell of blood" (Lessons in Forgetting 317).

After this brutal accident she becomes a motionless, pathetic and frozen figure. In this episode the novelist draws towards the disparities in the social upbringing. Smriti was born in

United States where people are broader minded regarding the such type of social concern but here she faces the social dogmas which limits the role of women. She considers it as her duty to amend the social injustice but her identity is crushed. Maya Vinay remarks:

Smriti in *Lessons in Forgetting* is a victim of such a mistaken identity. Men in India are still unequipped to face such a kind of modernity, which is an off shoot of progressive western education and upbringing. Smriti with all her fivolousness is also a girl who wants to bring about a reform in the society by her social activism. She is cruelly punished by the male society for her interference in local matters... She appears freak in the eyes of her community since she demonstrates the possibilities of her society to a group of people who are not yet ready to either grasp these possibilities or acknowledge them. (May 118-119)

The novelist presents the determination of modern woman through the character Lily who is the grandmother of Meera. Lily comes to know the growing relationship of Meera and Jak. She feels Meera's dilemma regarding the relationship. She advises Meera "I don't want to talk about the wind or the trees. If they bother you so much, chop them down!" (*Lessons in Forgetting* 269). There is a traditional set of rules for each and every age group in the Indian Society. In Indian society it is considered that old men and women have to spend their time in praying to gods rather than participating in day to day activities. Lily gets a role in a T.V. programme at her old stage. She accepts it happily and expresses her desire to act in the series. She identifies herself with her role for T.V. programmer. She reflects her determination and express her firm decision before Meera. Lily states "You don't have to say anything. I am not asking you for permission. I am informing you of my decision" (*Lessons in Forgetting* 273).

Lessons in Forgetting beautifully presents women's quest to move on in life. The novelist presents the women's dilemma through the character Meera whether she should accept the relationship with Jak publically or gives up all the possibilities in life. Smriti emerges as

one of the most influential character whose desire is to eradicate the practice of finding sex of unborn baby and abortion of the foetus of girl child. Through the character, Lily the novelist presents the determination of women in the modern perspective.

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